

Chapter 1

Stars Being Born Every Day

You've bought this book, or maybe you're reading this first page to get an idea about podcasting. Either way, you've heard about the explosion in listenership for podcasts, the self-produced programs made possible by ubiquitous cheap computing power that has replaced expensive studio production equipment. You'll find everything you need to know about the creative and technical challenges — because there are still many ahead of you — that you'll face as you begin the adventure of producing audio programs for your friends, family, company, or a global audience.

What Is Podcasting?

Just two years ago, at this writing, the idea of a “podcast” made its first appearance on the scene. Already as many as 10,000 people are podcasting and as many as 15 million listeners are downloading and listening to audio programming through Real Simple Syndication (RSS) channels. Early podcasters are earning a living from their work, while others have launched service businesses that deliver audio production for commercial clients. But for most, the vast majority, podcasting is about one-to-few communication facilitated by IP-based networks and simple tools (see Figure 1.1).

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FIGURE 1.1

The tools of the podcaster's trade



The basics you need to do a podcast: A microphone and recording device, which could be an old tape player, a solid-state recorder, or your personal computer, editing software, and a place to host the resulting program. This sounds like a lot of pieces, but compared to the complexity of producing and distributing a radio or television program a decade ago, podcasting is self-produced media realized. In a nutshell, a podcast is, according to Wikipedia, a “direct download...file, but the subscription feed of automatically delivered new content is what distinguishes a podcast from a simple download or real-time streaming.” This is a description of many different services that pre-date the introduction of podcasting; a more accurate definition, in our opinion, is this:

“A podcast is a series of audio (or video) programs delivered through a static URL containing an RSS feed that automatically updates a list of programs on the listener's computer so that people may download new programs using a desktop application. Programs can be delivered to the listener automatically or when they choose to download them.”

Already there are variations on this definition, because podcasts can be delivered directly to handheld devices without the intervention of a desktop computer or software. Likewise, podcasts have changed radically as video has been added to the mix. Originally, podcasts were simply MP3 files, a widely used audio format. Today, podcasts include MP4 and other video file formats, as well as other audio formats such as Windows Media, Ogg Vorbis, and Audible that support subscription-based and advertising-based podcast business models.

If you remember something called “push” technology from the late 1990s, podcasting may sound familiar. Companies like PointCast Inc. distributed client software that periodically polled network servers, downloading massive amounts of topical content, including audio and video programming, dumping older content from the user’s hard drive to make room for the new material. Pointcast’s audience could browse the new content without any network latency, which was the rule in those dial-up times. It was the first attempt at non-streaming rich media delivery, but “push” was doomed to fail by its business model, which front-loaded costs for everyone — producers paid for distribution, and Pointcast incurred massive bandwidth and technology development expenses that killed the company before it could convert its audience into advertising revenues. The audience got everything for free, although Pointcast had plans to offer subscription-based programs before it collapsed well in advance of the rest of the Internet bubble’s bursting.

However, push technology and podcasting are significantly different. Podcasting is built on open-source foundations. Instead of concentrating the distribution channel in the hands of a few companies like Pointcast, podcasting protocols allow any developer to add the ability to query a server to retrieve content to its application or Web service, and most importantly, podcasting allows anyone to place a program into distribution without having to go through an intermediary host that aggregates many channels of information. Pointcast is unneeded in many podcasting scenarios, because the podcaster can communicate directly with the listener. At its founding, podcasting was designed to subvert the economic equations of existing media, thwarting not just the role of the aggregator but also the advertiser.

CROSS-REF See Chapter 2, “Podcasting’s Meteoric Trajectory,” for a more complete history of the development of podcasting.

But much about podcasting remains controversial because of those initial assumptions about the revenue models, or lack thereof.

Discussion of podcasting is difficult, because it is so young. The people who helped launch the industry are very particular about what is a podcast and what isn’t. Moreover, they are vocal about it. We’ll cover these controversies throughout this book, but they can be summarized by saying that the technology is frequently mistaken for a genre. That is, people talk about podcasts like the form is a kind of poem or book, turning definitions of what a podcast should be into a kind of religious argument. Podcasts, according to programmer Dave Winer, one of the people credited with inventing the technology, should be free — in fact, according to Winer, podcasts were engineered specifically to defy advertisers’ efforts to include promotional content in podcast programs.

“If you’re not using MP3, you’re probably trying to make podcasting into a replay of previous media,” Winer wrote on November 12, 2005, the day after an advertising tracking service was introduced by Audible Inc. “By design, podcasting took a poison pill at the very beginning of its life that made it impossible for the corporate types to subvert it without fundamentally changing what it is. That’s why I was sure that Audible wasn’t doing podcasting. Basically MP3 can’t be rigged up to serve the purpose of advertisers, and that’s why I love MP3. And only MP3 provides the portability and compatibility that users depend on. Any other method will force them to jump through hoops that they will resist. If so, then podcasting isn’t for the advertisers.”

Winer's initial choices about podcasting's technology reflect that he served the poison pill. Yet, by the time he wrote this, podcasts were being delivered in many different file formats, including Quicktime files that played on Video iPods from Apple Computers Inc. The cat was out of the bag, and new uses must and will be found for podcasting or users will route around the rigid boundaries.

In fact, if podcasting is going to remain relevant — and we think it will — the technology will be extremely pliant, supporting many file formats and many more business models. Had the inventors of the personal computer decided what kind of projects it could be used for, the PC would have been designed for failure. In fact, one of the fathers of the PC, Alan Kay, says today that the problem holding back the personal computer today is reliance on the narrow range of ideas he helped think up in the 1970s.

Why Podcasting Is Different

The unique thing about podcasting is the flexibility it enables for both producers and the audience. Both producers and audiences enjoy immensely more freedom today than they did in the broadcast schedule. Creative people, whether voice talent, writers, or ordinary people with a passion — about almost anything, from their hobby to the history of their family or a project at work — can find an audience. Even small audiences are eminently reasonable in podcasting, because the costs of producing and delivering programs are so low that any niche interest can be served. We saw the same phenomenon in publishing with the advent of computer desktop publishing, when a flowering of small magazines suddenly appeared to serve incredibly focused markets and newsletters sprouted in every industry and at every company.

Listeners, too, are freed in an important way: The schedule they listen on is in their hands, not controlled by the broadcaster who delivers the shows. Podcasts allow the complete reordering of the listening day, providing users who download programs the ability to start and stop a program at will, to listen at their leisure to programs at any time of the day or night. The result of this bidirectional freedom is a media environment where programming is offered by producers and selected and listened to by people on a fluid schedule and under a far broader range of business models than were possible before. Add to this easy-to-distribute environment the element of portability — a podcast can be loaded onto a variety of portable devices, from MP3 players to wireless telephone handsets — and the location of the listener has been radically transformed. No longer does listening to a program on the Web mean having to be tethered to your computer. Just export the show to your iPod and go.

Thousands, if not millions, of different messages can be delivered through a podcast. What blogs are to the newspapers, podcasts are for radio, deconstructing the strict order of the mass-media marketplace. Where radio and audio production have been rarified professions in the mass media era, the relentless march of Moore's Law has brought the tools and distribution networks that made those mass media expensive to experiment with and compete in to a generation known as podcasters. This book is your guide to producing programs and forging new channels of communication between your coworkers or family that are as easy to use as e-mail.

Voices make the podcast. For the past 85 years, since commercial radio first appeared, audiences have become accustomed to a narrow range of voices that are “professional,” usually deeper than the ordinary speaker and paced like a race or a seduction, but decidedly not like everyone normally speaks. Podcasts break that monopoly. In less than a decade, commercial radio has descended into crisis as audiences flee to the Internet, in the form of streaming and downloadable programming, not to mention the allure of paid commercial-free radio broadcast from satellites in space. Podcasts burst on the scene in late 2004, claiming thousands of listeners in the first few months and millions within a year. Depending on which research firm you believe, between 30 million to 50 million people will be podcast listeners by the end of the decade. The monopoly that was radio is broken, dismantled, kaput.

A Podcast for Every Listener

Podcasting began with voices, just like radio. The first podcasters were also the medium’s creators, hacking together technologies to make the programs they recorded available, and they will be remembered for their contributions—people like Frank Conrad, the Pittsburgh-based radio operator who first turned his ham radio transmitter into a foundation for popular entertainment. Conrad’s audience grew through the auspices of a store that sold radios and advertised on his “station.” Eventually, the station became KDKA in 1920, the first licensed commercial radio operation in the United States.

In podcasting, the voices began with Dave Winer, whose Morning Coffee Notes were among the first to be delivered via RSS. On his first program, from August 12, 2004, Winer related his ideas about blogging and journalism, beginning with a story of hellish travels:

“Good afternoon, everybody. This is your friend, Dave, calling in... checking in from New York, where it’s hot and humid. You can tell that, you can hear the sound of the air conditioner in the background, probably. Had a very eventful trip across the country yesterday...”

Winer’s podcasts allowed him to evangelize the technology itself. As one of the creators of RSS, he was interested in finding other uses for the XML (Extensible Markup Language) syndication format that let bloggers offer subscription services of their text feeds. Podcasting became its own best marketing in Winer’s hands, as well as those of former MTV VJ Adam Curry, who introduced his Daily Source Code program on August 13, 2004.

Unfortunately, the early episodes of Daily Source Code are no longer available on the Web, but the show combined Curry’s patter with his favorite independent music and “mash-ups” of popular music that he made himself. Curry’s promotion of other podcasters was critical to the evolution of the medium, because he became one of the most reliable sources, in the early days, of new podcasts.

Fairly soon, several podcast indices offered links to new podcasts, which gave rise to what can only be called “surprising” new programs. Out of those lists, early “stars” rose. Dave Slusher, who’d done some radio in school and performed computer programming services in South Carolina for a living, was among the first to grab a loyal audience.

Slusher riffs in his program, *Evil Genius Chronicles*, about his day, the news, culture, technology, and coding over a music track. The effect he was aiming for was similar to National Public Radio’s *This*

American Life, but what he created was uniquely Dave Slusher. What did it do for Slusher? His *Evil Genius Chronicles* podcast became a source of revenue from sponsors and the sale of a small collection of Evil Genius t-shirts, as well as advertising revenue from his blog, which saw more traffic. The show also made people aware of his coding skills, bringing him consulting work and, basically, making his effort to earn a living more flexible than he dreamed it could be.

The podcast is, for most people, another piece in a complex puzzle that makes an economic life possible. But it won't always be so.

Dawn Miceli and Drew Domkus, a married couple living on a shuttered dairy farm in Wisconsin, launched a funny, truthful show about marriage — their marriage and everyone else's — that combined banter and sex, sometimes recorded for The Dawn and Drew Show (see Figure 1.2). Dawn and Drew became some of the first to “go pro” as podcasters, earning their living on podcasting after a year “on the air.” Their show is sponsored, and they won a slot on Sirius Satellite Radio. The couple has become something like celebrities, but not quite so full of bull as most of what passes for celebrity, because it is not manufactured but *captured* in sound.

The Longer Tail

Podcasting's history is evaporating as quickly as storage limits for hosting accounts fill up. We can't tell you what Adam Curry said, because there's no copy of the file accessible through any links exposed by Google and other search engines. Podcasters are often forced to purge their archives to keep their costs low, yet all these older programs make up the “long tail,” the vast catalog of content that can serve the incredibly diverse interests of listeners for many years, but only if the programs remain available. What made the long tail interesting in the first place was the notion that at a site like iTunes or Amazon, which make available titles that couldn't be stocked in a retail store on CD or on shelves, was the fact that almost every title would sell in a year.

The problem podcasting has is a shortage of storage, which organizations like The Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org/>) and Our Media (<http://www.ourmedia.org/>) are seeking to ameliorate by providing free storage to content that can be freely reused.



OurMedia's message: Share and share alike

However, podcasters have to know to go to these sites and upload their programs, and if they want to protect the content, they are left on their own. In the former case, society loses out, and in the latter, audiences and producers lose. As podcasting matures, a full range of business and sharing models will be needed to preserve the creative efforts of so many people.

FIGURE 1.2

Dawn and Drew: honest sex and marriage



That's not to say that Dawn and Drew are a success because they make money. Rather, they would probably be doing this show anyway, because the stories, the bickering, the funny criticisms and witticisms seem to flow out of these two. They exemplify the kind of honest passion that can be captured by a microphone and find an audience.

Anyone can build a business on this technology, but it still takes talent and a kind of excitement that makes producing a show thrilling every time the mic goes live. Another couple, Rob and Dana Greenlee, created *WebTalk Radio* long before podcasting came along, migrating to the new distribution technology when it swept away streaming as the preferred way to get audio over the Internet. Dana Greenlee says the problem is that after years, you start to think about producing as "time to make doughnuts, oh well." Indeed, *Wired Magazine* wrote about "podfading," the tendency for programs to disappear as producers lose interest. Keeping the excitement in a podcast is critical, whether you're going to deliver it to the world or to a small group.

But the Greenlees have enjoyed many rewards for their efforts, including executive jobs won by Rob and Dana's becoming the first podcaster for CBS Television, where she produced shows about the Fall 2005 television shows offered by CBS. Their podcasts were far less expensive than the radio program they'd previously produced, since they no longer had to pay for airtime on local stations, and their audience was dramatically expanded both geographically and in size by the move to downloadable audio.

Performers have shown the way to success, as well. Robby Gervais, star of the BBC's *The Office*, launched his podcast with friends Steve Merchant and (the astonishingly funny) Karl Pilkington (see Figure 1.3). The first "season," when it was hosted by the Guardian Unlimited, a London-based online newspaper site, achieved a huge audience, as many as 250,000 per episode, more than most cable channels can expect.

The show is funny and is clearly a performance, for no one can be quite as dense as Karl Pilkington pretends to be. Gervais, an accomplished actor and comedian, took his experience in radio to podcasting, building a show on quick transitions between conversational segments, very like radio. For these guys, who have worked together in media for years, the performance is natural. They've practiced their enthusiasm as their work and their natural humor shines through.

FIGURE 1.3

Karl Pilkington: genius stupidity as performance art



Gervais broke new ground when he partnered with Audible Inc. to offer the first subscription podcast, *The Ricky Gervais Show*, charging \$6.95 for six shows, which is now in its third “season.” The podcast also reinforces his relationship with fans and is just part of the total Gervais package.

Journalists, too, have made the transition to podcasting. Since the podcasting world began in and amidst technology, it was natural that some of the most successful podcasts would be about technology. This Week in Technology, or TWiT, hosted by Leo LaPorte, a radio and television host for many years, is a well-sponsored program that provides technology news and reviews, often in front of a live audience at retail locations and conferences, a kind of *Tonight Show* that makes obsolescence fun (finding new stuff to buy is entertainment). LaPorte manages to turn almost everything he does into a podcast, offering a variety of specialized programs, such as *Inside the Net*, that serve parts of his audience.

A news background trains the mind to make use of so many parts of every recording and experience, because news is made on a strict budget — now more than ever.

The last area where podcasting has just started to take hold is in business, where a budget is appreciated too. As a medium, podcasts enjoy a special quality of taking little time to produce. Podcasts are a natural for marketing and engaging customers in discussion about a company's products and services. With less than two years behind it, podcasting hasn't provided the business world enough examples of success to make it a major movement, but like the Web, television, and radio before, it will happen.

Corporate podcasts might be marketing vehicles, and companies certainly will find a way to sponsor audio delivered via RSS and download. Advertisers have begun making noise about the millions, even billions, they want to put behind new programs. Think, though, about how simple it is today to start your relationship with customers. From a local nursery that prints the URL for its podcast about gardening on its sales receipts to chains that distribute fliers at retail outlets advertising a contest that, like *American Idol*, brings the voice of the customer to the world through a podcast, the possibilities for programming are endless.

Summary

Podcasts speak; this book can't be heard. We give you the gospel in these pages, even as the podcast revolution continues at breakneck pace. Making podcasts, learning the tools you'll need to use, and understanding the distribution options and their implications for your budget are all that stand between you and those possibilities.

- Podcasting builds on a broad range of media and Internet developments, including failed notions, such as “push technology,” and the foundations of the Web and blogging, including hyperlinks, RSS, and news aggregator applications.
- The basic tools for producing your podcast are a microphone and recording device, typically one's computer, and the software for editing a raw recording into a finished show. On the distribution side, you need to set up or purchase space on a Web server.
- Developer Dave Winer made and distributed the first podcast on August 12, 2004, though many programs known as podcasts today predate his *Morning Coffee Notes* podcast. The key innovation was the combination of RSS and sound files delivered as enclosures.
- Adam Curry and a number of other people contributed to the development of the first podcast receiver application, known as a “podcatcher.” Curry's *Daily Source Code* podcast was the primary popularizer of the medium during its first year.
- Podcasts are fun and personal, studied and slapstick. You don't need to copy anyone to be an original, but the pioneers in the format have paved the way at considerable expense. There is a lot to learn from them.
- The first paid-circulation podcast was The Ricky Gervais Show, which featured Gervais, the star of the BBC's *The Office* sitcom, his *Office* co-creator, Steven Merchant, and Karl Pilkington, who acts inexplicably stupid (it's a wonder he's survived in this Darwinian world).
- In this book for would-be podcasting pros we emphasize how to make money with podcasts in spite of the medium's original design, which attempted to prevent advertising and money-making. There's no reason you have to try to make money with your podcast — and if you just want to have fun you'll learn everything you need to know here — but, if you do want to make money, this is the book for you.

In the next chapter, we walk through the technologies and development of podcasting, an already riotous history that includes bickering, counterclaims to inventions, and stealth attempts to rewrite the story. On that foundation, you learn what these developments can lead to, including new markets for your creative work and the applications for podcasting in corporate and marketing settings.

